

### ***The martyrdom of Polycarp***

Polycarp was Bishop of Smyrna in the second century, around 156 AD. A man renowned in his time for his great godliness, commitment to Christ, pastoral care of the church and evangelistic vigour. Under Polycarp's care, the churches in and around Smyrna flourished. He was, a man who placed everything (even his life) into the hands of Jesus Christ.

At the age of eighty-six, he was arrested and taken before the Roman Proconsul and was called upon to recant his trust in Jesus, under threat of death. Here is an account of his trial...

*And as he was brought forward, the tumult became great when they heard that Polycarp was taken. And when he came near, the proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp. On his confessing that he was, [the proconsul] sought to persuade him to deny [Christ], saying, "Have respect to your old age," and other similar things, according to their custom, [such as], "Swear by the genius of Caesar; repent, and say, Away with the Atheists." But Polycarp, gazing with a stern countenance on all the multitude of the wicked heathen then in the stadium, and waving his hand towards them, while with groans he looked up to heaven, said, "Away with the Atheists." Then, the proconsul urging him, and saying, "Swear, and I will set you at liberty, deny Christ;" Polycarp declared, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?"*

*And when the proconsul yet again pressed him, and said, "Swear by the genius of Caesar," he answered, "Since you are vainly urgent that, as you say, I should swear by the genius of Caesar, and pretend not to know who and what I am, hear me declare with boldness, I am a Christian. And if you wish to learn what the doctrines of Christianity are, appoint me a day, and you shall hear them." ...The proconsul then said to him, "I have wild beasts at hand ; to these will I cast you, unless you repent." But he answered, "Call them then, for we are not accustomed to repent of what is good in order to adopt that which is evil; and it is well for me to be changed from what is evil to what is righteous." But again the proconsul said to him, "I will cause you to be consumed by fire, seeing you do not fear the wild beasts, if you will not repent." But Polycarp said, "You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and after a little is extinguished, but you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. But why delay? Bring forth what you will."*

He refused, and was martyred for his faith.

His trust in Christ was total and absolute. **Was he a fool to do such a thing?**

Are you a fool to trust Christ totally and absolutely, with everything you have and in everything you do?

Can you really count on Jesus, when push comes to shove, to stand by the promises he has made to those who trust him.

Promises of forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration, salvation and life eternal?

Well, tonight from this passage in Matthew 9, I hope that together we will see that Jesus was everything he claimed he was, and that he did everything that he said he would do. I hope to show you, not only that he is totally trustworthy - but that you would be a fool to place your trust in anyone or anything else.

In the passage just before the scene we are about to look at, Jesus and his disciples were in the house of Matthew (Levi) the tax collector. Jesus had been quizzed on all sorts of issues and he had basically revealed to those who were there that he was the Son of God - he had come to save the sinful - and that his presence in the world was a cause for great rejoicing and celebration.

And in the last part of that section, Jesus revealed that he had not come to prop up the old order which the Pharisees and teachers loved so much - rather he had come to fulfil the old and to create something new in its place. He spoke of old and new cloth, old and new wine skins. Jesus was overhauling the means by which people came into relationship with God (got into heaven). He came to reveal that it was only through placing our hope and trust on the Christ - the Son of God, that you could enter into heaven and be right with God.

*The question is: - Is the Christ (Jesus) trustworthy?*

### **THE DEAD ARE RAISED**

As we come back to Matthew 9:18, we find Jesus still in the house of Matthew the Tax collector (now Matthew the disciple). And as Jesus has been answering questions about fasting and the forgiveness of sins and so on - a man enters the house.

He is immediately recognised as one of the leaders of the local Synagogue. The first impression of those sitting around would surely have been, "Oh oh, here's trouble" Jesus and first century clergy did not get on that well - in fact the 1<sup>st</sup> century clergy hated him.

But the leader is not there for a fight, he comes and kneels at Jesus feet. He assumes a position of total humility, as though he were in the presence of someone with the power to grant great favours or requests - he humbles himself before Jesus as though he were a king (as a leader in the Synagogue, he would never have done this to a Pharisee). He assumes that position, because he has a great request of Jesus - he needs a big favour.

It is in fact, he has an impossible favour to ask. He says to Jesus - "*come and raise my little daughter from the dead.*"

I expect that the whole house would have been in stunned and silent astonishment. What an outrageous request! I expect that everyone there would have supposed that Jesus would have said to this grieving man (who's name, Mark tells us, is Jairus) as gently as he could - "*Friend, you ask for too much. Your request is impossible for me to grant. I'm sorry, but you need to go back home to your grieving family.*" But that is not what the text tells us that Jesus does - on the contrary, he gets up and immediately he goes with the grieving father.

## **A WOMAN AS GOOD AS DEAD**

So now Jesus and the Synagogue leader and some others are on their way to his house. Mark's account of this story tells us that there's a crowd gathering as they walk.

Among them is a woman. A woman who is also in great need. For twelve years she has suffered from hemorrhages - the suggestion is that she is bleeding from the womb. This being the case, she is an unclean woman. According to the law, any woman with an issue of blood from the womb was to be considered unclean. Everything she sat on, everything she slept on was also to be considered unclean.

If you touched any of these things, or anything that she touched - her uncleanness was transferred to you and the law required that you vigorously wash not only yourself, but your clothes and anything else you touched. In short, she was like a leper because of her condition. Socially she would have been totally isolated and shunned. Religiously, she would have been considered outside of relationship with God because she was unclean - unable to offer anything at the temple for her sins - unable even to go near the temple. Unworthy to speak to God, unworthy to be heard by God. She is as good as dead to her community - and she had been that way for twelve years.

She should not have been in that crowd - she would have been contaminating people left, right and centre. She should have been off somewhere away from people - but she wasn't. She is in the crowd, hoping against hope even to touch the tassels on the bottom of Jesus cloak.

He is her only hope for healing, he is her only hope for cleansing - he is her only hope for a life restored to relationship with God and with God's people.

Yes, she's superstitious (like the people in Acts 5) - but she is more than that. Everything she has is focused on Jesus, all her hopes are placed on him.

**Is she a fool to risk so much public humiliation and perhaps violence in order to touch him? Is she a fool to have put all her eggs in this one basket called Jesus?**

Read Matt. 9:22. The Nazarene proves himself worthy of her desperate faith - and a woman who was as good as dead - stands quaking in the crowd with a new life through Christ.

## **A CHILD MERELY ASLEEP**

But remember we are still on the way to the Synagogue leader's house. Jairus has come to Jesus and asked the impossible. "*raise my daughter from the dead*".

Now either this man has great faith Jesus' ability to do as he has asked - or he is an idiot whose grief has sent him potty. **Is he a fool to ask what he has from Jesus?** *Will he be, in the end, crazy Jairus who made a fool of himself and his house and shamed his dead daughter's corpse by letting that Nazareth carpenter play with it?*

Maybe, but Jesus' readiness to respond suggests that perhaps Jairus is not as crazy as he seems - and the incident with the woman also points to the fact that great things are afoot.

At the house, Jesus sends the mourners away and says "*She is not dead, only sleeping!*"

It's an outrageous thing to say and the crowd laughs at him as you'd expect. But I think there is something very important being said here, when Jesus speaks of *sleep* instead of death - and the important thing that is going on is the faith relationship that this Synagogue leader has with the Christ.

For I do not believe for a moment that Jairus' request of Jesus was the asking of a grief-crazed man. I say it was the asking of a person who had great faith in the man from Nazareth. I say it was the sort of request only faith would prompt. He places the body of his daughter into the hands of Jesus... **Now, was he a fool to place this much hope and trust in Christ?**

No, he is not. His daughter breathes again in Christ's arms - and what we have is a life-sized, technicolour illustration of the fact that for those who trust in the Lord Jesus - death has no power. For the faithful, physical death is little more than sleep - before we awaken to life eternal.

The little girl is alive, and she stands as a witness to the people - that trust placed in Christ is never folly.

## **THE BLIND SEE.**

But once again, the day is not over. On the way back to Matthew's house (or perhaps Peter's) Jesus and (we assume) the crowd are followed by two blind men - and the words on their lips are extraordinary. They shout as they hear the people pass "*Have mercy on us, Son of David!*" Now you must understand that the name *Son of David* was not an everyday greeting in Palestine. It was a title that was used exclusively for the anointed one of God. For the Messiah - the one whom God would send to usher in his kingdom and bring about the reconciliation of all things back to God and initiate his rule. And this is the first time in Matthew's Gospel that that term is used of Jesus.

So the blind men call out to Jesus, and directly identify him as the Messiah, the chosen one of God! And the irony is, that after all that has happened, and all that Jesus has done - it is not the crowd and disciples, but the **blind men who see Jesus for who he truly is!**

They follow him home, and once they are in doors, Jesus asks them - "*Do you believe I am able to do this?*" To restore your vision. They answer "Yes".

**Question:** *Is there trust misplaced? Are they fools to believe that Jesus is truly the one that God has sent ?*

Well, according to their faith, it is done for them - and at the end of the day - light shines in their darkness, and they do see clearly.

### **A CAPTIVE IS LIBERATED**

And after these two see themselves out (PUN), a man who is possessed, held captive by a demon which prevents him from speaking is released from his imprisonment.

At the end of the day - the crowd is astonished: - the evidence for the trustworthiness of Jesus as the Christ is virtually overwhelming and they testify that "*Never has anything like this been seen in Israel.*" The crowd and the disciples are confronted at each incident to see the truth - weight the evidence - and place their hope and trust and faith in Jesus - as the Son of God.

But not all are convinced - the Pharisees look on and say: "*He is not God's chosen - he is Satan's chosen.*"

But I want to ask you, at the end of this passage - who stands as the fools?

Is it the woman who stands cleansed and restored to new life because of her faith?

Is it the Synagogue ruler who asked the impossible and is now able to watch his daughter grow to womanhood.

Is it the men who walk in the glorious light of restored vision?

Is it the man who now speaks freely, having had his body freed from demonic captivity?

They are not fools - they are profoundly wise - for they placed their trust and hope and faith in the Lord Jesus, and they were vindicated.

The supreme fools in this passage, are those who see it all, hear it all, experience it all and yet they will not turn and they will not trust.

### **Conclusion.**

As we move through our Christian lives - the temptation is always before us to place our trust elsewhere than in Christ.

To believe that we can find strength, or hope or security in some one or something other than the Son of God.

For me, its an almost habitual desire to rely on my own strength and trust in my own character and actions. But those who really know me, know what a selfish man I am. They know how easily tempted I am and how weak I am. They also know how unreliable I am, how often I break my promises. And you would be a fool to place all your hope and faith and trust on me - because in the end, I'll let you down.

And can I say that John Howard and Kim Beasley and Morris lemma and all the rest are just like me too! They will not lay down their lives for you! They will not carry your burdens or take your afflictions onto themselves. They cannot make you right with God - and they will not see you into heaven.

Only Christ would do, can do and has done that.

When they arrested John the Baptist, and threw him in gaol, John sent word to Jesus (11:2-6) and asked him: "*Are you the one who is to come? Or are we to wait for another?*"

Jesus' answered John in the words of Isaiah 35 & 61 and in the stories we have read from Matthew 8-9, he said "*the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, , the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.*"

The actions are all there - not one single person who placed their trust on Jesus was ever disappointed. Not, those we saw tonight, not Peter, not Paul, not John and not Polycarp.

The evidence is all there.

Look and judge - and please, please, do not be a fool.